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**Testimony Before United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and  
Transportation**

**Submitted by Bill Bradbury, Oregon Secretary of State**

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Back home, the Division of Tourism's slogan is "Oregon: Things look different here." It seems appropriate to begin my testimony with that phrase, since it applies as much to our election system as it does to our scenery.

As the 2000 presidential election clearly highlighted, there are many different ways to record the will of the voters. Ensuring that every state provides its citizens with an accessible, accurate and secure election process needs to be one of our top priorities as a nation, and I commend the Congress for your efforts to help make every vote of every American count.

As Congress considers electoral reform, it is important for you to remember that state and local officials conduct national elections. We must retain the authority to do so in the manner that most suits our electors.

In Oregon, that process is Vote-by-Mail. No federal attempt to solve the very real problems of last fall's election should attempt to impose a "one size fits all" solution on state and local governments. National standards must recognize and appreciate local differences. I would not seek to impose Vote-by-Mail on another state and will fight any federal effort to take it away from Oregonians.

Oregon's history with Vote-by-Mail has proven time and again that the system raises voter participation, decreases costs and increases the overall integrity of the election process. It is also a system that the vast majority of Oregonians love.

Over the past 19 years, Oregon has conducted hundreds of local and several statewide Vote-by-Mail elections. In 1981, the Oregon legislature approved a test of Vote-by-Mail for local elections. Vote-by-Mail was made permanent in 1987, when a majority of counties used it for local and special elections.

In January 1996, Oregon gained national attention by holding the first statewide election completely by mail to fill a vacancy in a federal office, electing Ron Wyden to the U.S. Senate.

By the May 1998 primary, 41 percent of registered voters in Oregon were permanent absentee voters. Overall, the state posted a record low turnout at 35 percent, with absentee ballots representing nearly two-thirds of all ballots cast. Of those voters who requested absentee ballots, 53 percent returned them. Only 22 percent of the remaining registered voters who did not request absentee ballots actually voted. Oregon thus became the first state to have more ballots cast by mail than at the polls during a polling place election.

Hoping to improve access to the ballot and increase voter turnout, supporters of expanding Vote-by-Mail to all elections submitted signatures to qualify the issue for the 1998 General Election ballot. In November of that year, Oregon voters approved the measure by a vote of 757,204 to 334,201 - nearly 70 percent in favor. Of all ballots cast at the election, 58 percent were cast as absentee, leaving only 42 percent of the ballots cast at the polls.

In May 2000, I oversaw the first all Vote-by-Mail primary in Oregon's history. A total of 900,000 Oregonians cast ballots in the 2000 primary, which was a 16 percent increase over the highest number of votes *ever cast* in a polling place Primary Election. That high 2000 primary turnout reversed a steady twenty-year decline in the number of Oregonians casting Primary Election ballots.

And on November 7, 2000, Oregon had yet another "first" in Vote-by-Mail - we became the first state in the nation to conduct a presidential election entirely by mail. Building on the success of the May primary, I issued a challenge to all Oregonians to have the highest voter turnout in the nation last fall - and we came close.

Eighty percent of registered voters cast ballots and we ranked ninth in the nation in voter turnout. Of the eight states with higher turnout, only two were larger in population than Oregon and both of those states had same-day registration.

Our Vote-by-Mail system also provides excellent access for disabled voters. Any voter who would have difficulty voting for any reason can call a county election official to request assistance. The county elections office sends a bipartisan team to the voter's home to provide assistance at no expense to the voter. Marion County provides a tactile ballot and all 36 counties provide both the ballot and the Voters' Pamphlet on tape.

Oregon's Vote-by-Mail system is a positive model for other states with high percentages of permanent absentee voters. For example in Washington State, over half of the votes cast in the General Election were cast by absentee ballot. Washington election officials essentially have to run two separate election systems: one mail system for the half of the population that votes absentee and a separate polling place system for the other half. This means that Washington is paying for both polling place employees *and* postage, which leads to expensive elections.

The same was true in Oregon until we made the transition to all Vote-by-Mail elections. The real triumph of our current election system is that it answered the need so clearly voiced when voters

overwhelmingly approved the Vote-by-Mail measure in 1998. The result is a process that is more accessible, produces higher voter turn out and provides lower costs for its citizens.

I presume that this committee will have an appreciation for Oregon's Vote-by-Mail system, given that both Senators Wyden and Smith serve on the committee, but we need to make sure that Congress as a whole is aware of the successes and differences of Oregon's voting system as it considers future across-the-board reforms.

Let's be clear; although I am proud of the very positive steps we have been able to take with elections in our state, there are still critical areas where we can make improvements in our efforts to make sure that every vote counts.

We've all heard plenty of stories from across the nation about troubles with punch card voting, and Oregon is no exception. In fact, Oregon's experience is an excellent example of exactly why punch cards must be phased out.

Seven of Oregon's 36 counties still use punch cards. Three of Oregon's four largest counties are included in the group, resulting in over 40 percent of Oregon's voters casting their votes with punch cards.

But punch cards are simply not voter friendly in a Vote-by-Mail environment.

The punch card was designed to be used in a polling place with a punch card stylus, but Oregon's punch card voters receive their ballots by mail. For a voter sitting on the living room couch, holding a ballot booklet in one hand and a punch card in the other, figuring out *which* hole corresponds to *which* position for *which* candidate or measure can be a very difficult task.

For example, a voter looks up Measure 86 in their ballot booklet. They read that they have to find and punch number 87 on their ballot if they want to vote "no" on Measure 86, or number 88 if they want to vote "yes." It can be very time-consuming to vote and even more so to double-check for mistakes. If a voter *does* discover that they've punched the wrong chad, they have to write to their election official or travel to their county elections office to request a whole new punch card ballot.

If our goal is to provide voters with an accessible, voter-friendly election process, as it clearly is, punch cards just don't make sense in Oregon.

We are one hundred percent committed to improving Oregon's election system so that every voter in our state can be absolutely confident that their vote will count the way they intended it to be counted. There is strong bipartisan support in our state to eliminate punch card ballots, and several legislators have proposed bills that would do exactly that.

The issue in Oregon is not getting legislative support for phasing out punch cards; we already have that. The critical issue is *how to pay* for the transition. Although we appreciate Senator McCain's efforts to

provide federal matching funds for states to improve their voting machinery, frankly the budget in Oregon is so tight this year that a fifty-fifty match just won't get us there very quickly.

We estimate the cost of replacing punch cards in Oregon to be about \$2 million. The fiscal reality in Oregon this biennium is that spending even \$1 million on voting machinery to match a \$1 million federal grant would mean cutting \$1 million from higher education, K-12 funding or health care. That would be very tough to sell.

Oregon is prepared to step up to the plate financially, but the speed with which we are able to eliminate punch cards is dependent upon the size of the federal match.

In order to move quickly enough so that Oregonians won't be voting with punch cards again in the next presidential election, we will need more federal assistance than is currently proposed by this bill. After the chaos we saw in Florida, I hope you would all agree that the integrity of our election system is a cost well worth paying for.

We also need to address election issues that go beyond the mechanics of how ballots are cast. The 2000 General Election raised questions all over the country about election security and the issue of equal access to the voting process.

A few Oregonians raised concerns after the General Election that people had voted more than once in several counties. Although not one case has been brought forward to support these allegations, it raises the issue of voting security and voter confidence in the election system.

Much of the focus of election reform has been on getting rid of punch card ballots; I am certain that creating a centralized voter registration system is just as essential in order to make real improvements to Oregon's elections. In fact, creating a centralized voter registration system is my highest legislative priority, with strong bipartisan support.

Oregon's voter rolls are currently housed in 36 separate county databases, with no real connection between them. We currently have no easy or efficient way to check for overlap between these databases.

Connecting the county voter databases into a statewide voter registration file would dramatically improve our ability to check for duplicate registrations and to update registrations. When a voter registers at a new address in a new county, a county election official would be able to do a real-time search of the entire state's voter registration system to find out quickly and easily if the voter was already registered somewhere else.

A centralized voter registration system would thus give Oregon among the cleanest voting rolls in the country. It would create the possibility to all but eliminate duplicate voting. It would significantly reduce the possibility of voter fraud. And the end result would be a real increase in voters' confidence in their election process. It does, however, carry a \$6 million price tag.

I appreciate the allocation of block grants for voter education in Senator McCain's bill. We currently do not have funds available for public service announcements or public education campaigns to reach voters with information about when they have to be registered or when their ballots have to be in the mail. Being able to provide these services would help us make sure that every eligible voter has the opportunity to cast their vote.

I sincerely hope that the Congress and state legislatures alike will be able to use this period of heightened public attention to the election process as an opportunity to make some significant and much-needed changes to the election system.

I urge you to take a broad view in terms of improving the election system, and I hope that the focus of this committee will not just be on how the votes of individual citizens have been recorded. I hope that federal assistance will be available broadly to improve states' abilities to meet the needs of their voters. I believe that it is essential that money be available not just for vote-casting equipment but for improvements to the whole range of processes and procedures that affect the integrity of our elections.

As Oregon's Chief Elections Officer, I believe that I have to do all I can to ensure that every step of the electoral process, beginning with registration and ending with the counting of ballots, is fair and friendly to every voter.